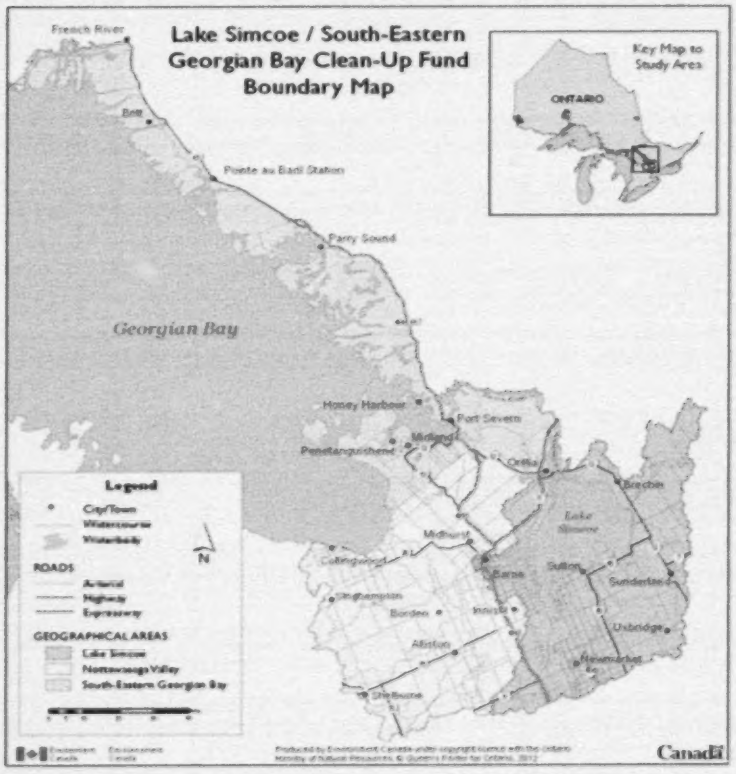
Evaluation at a Glance

Evaluation of the Lake Simcoe/South-eastern Georgian Bay Clean-up Fund – Lessons learned

About the program

Figure 1: Lake Simcoe and South-eastern Georgian Bay Clean-up Fund Boundary Map



Lake Simcoe and South-eastern Georgian Bay are in Southern Ontario. Lake Simcoe is located north of Toronto and is the largest lake in Ontario outside the Great Lakes system. It supplies drinking water to eight municipalities. As shown in Figure 1, Georgian Bay is connected to Lake Huron and the Great Lakes system and includes the UNESCO-designated Georgian Bay Biosphere Reserve. Both water bodies are major recreational areas that support and generate millions of dollars per year in tourism revenue.

The water quality and ecosystem health in parts of these areas are under threat from urban and shoreline development and agricultural activities. These activities contribute to excessive inputs of phosphorous, the growth of nuisance and toxic algae and the introduction of invasive species resulting in habitat loss. High levels of phosphorus can starve the water of oxygen, which affects cold-water fish, wildlife and overall water quality.

The Lake Simcoe/South-eastern Georgian Bay Clean-up Fund

The Lake Simcoe/South-eastern Georgian Bay Clean-Up Fund (the Fund) provided financial and technical support to implement priority projects through contributions to citizens, non-governmental organizations, provincial ministries, conservation authorities, land owners, First Nations, universities and industry. The Fund was active from 2012-13 to 2016-17. Total program expenditures over this five-year period were $28.9 million. The key components of this Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) program included:

- the management and administration of the grants and contributions (G&C) provided under the Fund to support community-based projects focused on specific priorities such as reducing phosphorous inputs from urban and rural sources
- research (science and monitoring) in the Lake Simcoe/South-eastern Georgian Bay area

What the evaluation found

Overall, the Fund was successful in providing support to a number of projects directly focused on the protection and restoration of aquatic habitat that have had some immediate outcomes. It supported projects that contributed to the reduction of phosphorus discharges to the two watersheds.

What worked well

The following aspects worked well and allowed the program to meet and surpass its stated outcomes by:

- increasing knowledge and understanding of the phosphorus reduction required to protect water quality and ecosystem health, especially in South-eastern Georgian Bay
- successfully leveraging funds from other participants like the Province of Ontario, local governments, conservation authorities and the private sector
- fostering collaboration and information and resource sharing among a variety of partners within the region
- putting in place a sound program design and governance structure that combined scientific research and stewardship
- delivering the program in an efficient and timely manner

What could be improved

As with all such activities, there are some aspects that could have been done better by:

- ensuring that performance data is available to measure all key expected results
- ensuring that the mandates of the governance committees are clearly defined and that one committee doesn't override the recommendations of the other on project funding priorities
- providing adequate communication materials to policy makers, stakeholders and members of the public who were involved or interested in stewardship-based activities
- issuing project approval notices in as timely a manner as possible

Lessons learned

Based on an analysis of the information gathered during the evaluation project, the evaluation team developed two broad lessons learned to help inform the design and delivery of future similar initiatives. As well, some suggested strategies are included for consideration.

Governance structure: Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of governance committees so that they work together to achieve the best results for the program. An effective governance structure could include a technical review committee to ensure that recommended projects are aligned with the best available science, and a public advisory committee to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are engaged.

As well, it is suggested that programs using this governance model consider the views of both committees in determining recommendations on project funding priorities.

Performance measures: Develop cost-effective performance indicators and a program database that allow the program to track all its key expected results.

About the evaluation

The evaluation of the Fund covered the period from 2012-13 to 2015-16, with updated information for 2016-17. The data collection methodologies included: a review of documents, data and literature; interviews with 29 stakeholders and 10 unfunded applicants; a review of the files for 21 completed projects; an online survey of 36 funding recipients; and case studies of four funded projects.